

Strong Democratic Leadership

—by Thomas M. Skrtic

Historically, we have ascribed three related but incompatible purposes to public education. The first, democratic equality, is concerned with preparing all of our young for democratic citizenship and, as a corollary, with minimizing social inequality to permit equal participation in the political process.

But the other two purposes, social mobility and social efficiency, involve giving some individuals and groups an advantage over others in school and the economy, thus increasing social inequality and ultimately undermining the purpose

of democratic equality. This incompatibility of purposes reflects the basic tension at the core of all liberal democracies, i.e., the tension between democracy and capitalism, between the ideal of political equality and the reality of social inequality. Public education can help reduce this tension by balancing its competing purposes, but doing so is increasingly difficult when one or more of them becomes inordinately dominant, which in turn can be traced to which form of liberalism is dominant in society.

Market liberalism views politics as an extension of market activity, which casts citizens as individual competitors in the consumption of political goods, and government merely as a protector of economic markets and private rights. Democracy

in this view is thin or *weak*, amounting to little more than occasional voting for self-selected political elites. This is the form of liberalism that's especially dominant today, which is why the purposes of social efficiency and social mobility are so prominent in public education, and

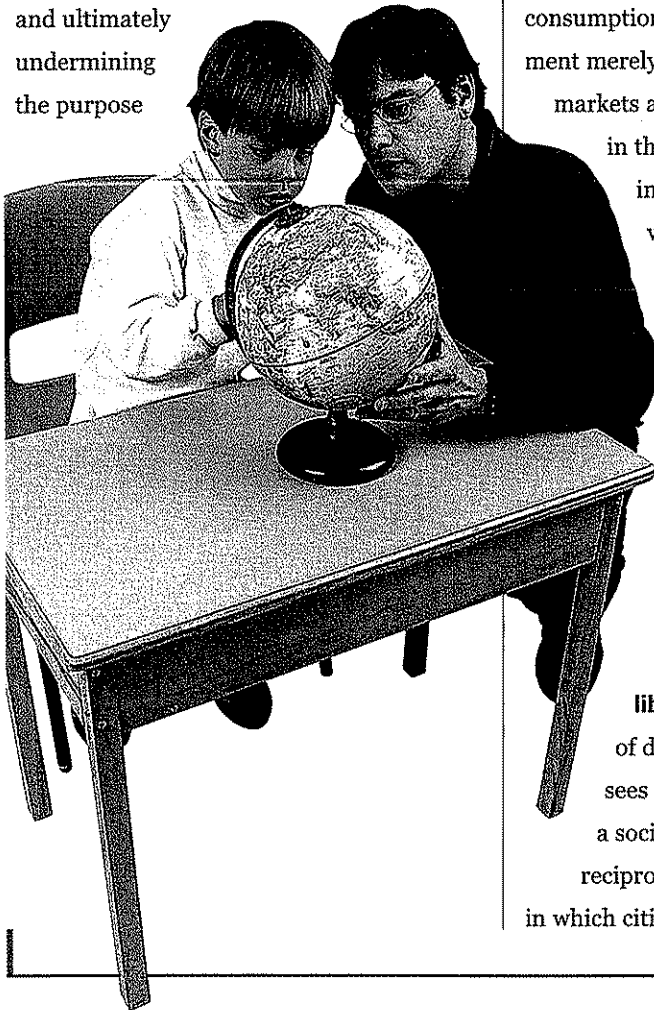
why democratic equality gets virtually no consideration at all.

Conversely, **developmental liberalism** emphasizes the purpose of democratic equality because it sees democratic politics itself as a social good, i.e., as a process of reciprocal self and social improvement in which citizens develop their capacity for

deliberative problem solving, thus making society more democratic and in turn creating ever more opportunities for political participation. Developmental liberals — most notably John Dewey in the early 20th century and social activists in the 1960s — are committed to a *strong*, participatory form of democracy in which all social institutions are sites of political education through participatory politics.

In this sense, Dewey saw schools as “doubly educational,” as sites of democratic training for the young and of political education for citizens and professionals. This is an ideal that requires what he called “democratic administration,” a form of leadership that engages citizens and professionals in deliberation and collective problem solving aimed at balancing education's purposes, activities, and competing values and interests.

Dewey and other “civic” progressives promoted democratic administration as an antidote to market liberalism and weak democracy. But their vision of leadership lost out to that of the “technocratic” progressives who also opposed market liberalism but saw technical efficiency through science and bureaucracy as the way to a more advanced and just society. The appeal and ultimate victory of this approach made technocratic management the dominant model of public administration in the 20th century and, moreover, established its technocratic vision of expert-driven democracy as a third form of liberalism — **managerial liberalism**.



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Managerial liberals are also weak democrats because, like market liberals, they favor limited citizen participation in politics. The difference is that, whereas market liberals view economic markets as the ideal coordinating mechanism of a liberal society, managerial liberals give this distinction to bureaucracy, and specifically to the capitalist industrial firm which they adopted as a model for government and public administration. Market and managerial liberals both want limited democracy, the former to protect the market from government interference, the latter to protect public bureaucracies from lay citizen interference. Prominent among early 20th-century managerial liberals was the first generation of university-trained school administrators and their professors, the so-called "administrative progressives" who institutionalized bureaucracy and technocratic administration in public education, creating by the 1950s a closed system in which school officials ignored with impunity parents, reformers and others outside the system.

It was this system, of course, that was called into question by the *Brown* decision in 1954 and the civil rights and disability rights movements of the 1960s and 1970s.

Although with passage of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 (ESEA) and the Education for All Handicapped Children Act of 1975 (EHA) civil and disability rights activists appeared to have won their battle with the closed system, their victory was hollow because of the system's ability to resist meaningful change and citizen participation. Moreover, under the banner of "standards-based reform," these laws have been transformed into the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB) and the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act of 2004 (IDEA), both of which are premised on market liberal principles. That is, by using test scores as a type of "bottom line" for schools, NCLB and IDEA have created a market-like rationality in public education — including competition among schools, performance penalties and privatization — thus eclipsing the strong democratic values of responsiveness and participation that were the hallmarks of the ESEA and EHA.

Beyond threatening the well-being of their intended beneficiaries, the market liberal orientation of NCLB/IDEA further elevates the educational purposes of social mobility and social efficiency over that of democratic equality, thus increasing social inequality and further weakening democracy.

One way to intervene in this situation, while holding schools accountable for important educational and social outcomes, is to democratize the means and ends of educational reform. The bureaucratic approach of NCLB/IDEA is an extreme form of what William Spady, the architect of outcomes-based education, calls "traditional" standards-based reform, which he rejects for merely seeking to make schools more efficient by tighter alignment of standards and existing

curricula, instructional practices and organizational structures.

As an alternative, he recommends a "transformational" model that begins with a discourse among educators and community stakeholders aimed at reaching consensus on broad school outcomes that lead to desirable conditions of life for students as future citizens. With such a vision, districts set their conventional frameworks aside, allowing their curriculum, practices and structures to evolve in support of outcomes that advance the preferred future for students and communities.

The advantage of engaging citizens and educators in such a deliberative process is that it's a step in the direction of schools as sites of political education, which itself is an essential first step in developing the capacities and sensibilities of the strong democrat in ourselves, our children and our culture. Given what's at stake today in a world of increasing cultural diversity, global interdependence, social inequality and environmental risk, developing the strong democratic leaders that Dewey called for should become the focus and mission of our public schools and schools of education. ●

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Author's note: For an extended discussion of this and related topics (with references), see my March 2006 Budig lecture, "Civic Professionalism and the Struggle over Needs," which is available from the School of Education, as well as Thomas M. Skrtic, "A Political Economy of Learning Disabilities," Learning Disabilities Quarterly, vol. 28, no. 2, 2005, pp. 149-155. A more comprehensive work co-authored with J. Robert Kent and tentatively titled, "Three Political Models of Educational Reform," is forthcoming.